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# The Quest for Truth in Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* and *Journey to the East*: the Vedantic Perspective

Jagriti Gupta, Ms. Aayushee Garg

B.A. (H) English, Semester 6, Batch 2020-2023, Amity School of Languages, Lucknow Campus, U.P. India

Assistant Professor, Amity School of Languages, Amity University, Lucknow Campus, U.P. India

**ABSTRACT:** This research article delves into the exploration of the themes of truth and self-discovery in the novelist Herman Hesse's literary works, particularly in the works *Siddhartha* and *The Journey to the East*, in the light of the Advaita Vedanta school of Indian philosophy. Hesse's works primarily revolve around the quest for truth, which is a very subjective and personal journey. The characters in his works often act as instruments in helping him explore the essential questions of existence, identity, purpose, and the meaning of life. In today's world, the daily grind of modern life has led humans to lead machine-like lives. The relentless emphasis on mechanically completing tasks has left humans disillusioned and incapable of experiencing life in its true form. Humans increasingly find themselves uncertain, unable to understand their own emotions and feeling miserable about their lives. During such moments of existential crisis, one questions one's purpose in life, searching for the truth about the nature of existence. As one contemplates the meaning of life and seeks to understand the truth about existence, it becomes important to consider the philosophical ideas that have thus far helped people know the true meaning of life and existence. A school of Indian philosophy which concerns itself with the purpose of human life and the truth of existence is Vedanta. Vedanta offers a philosophical framework for understanding the ultimate nature of reality and the relationship between the individual self and the ultimate reality, Brahman.

The Vedanta philosophy is founded on the ancient Hindu texts called Upanishads, which have often been referred to as the cream of the Vedas, the sacred Hindu texts. The core methodology of Vedanta philosophy comprises the pursuit of truth and enquiry into the self. Advaita Vedanta, a sub-school of Vedanta philosophy, emphasises the non-dual nature of reality. According to this philosophy, nothing exists apart from the self or pure consciousness. "In traditional Indian philosophy, based upon the Vedas, earthly life is always a struggle—not for survival but for truth, for something which lies hidden by the veil of Maya (the world perceived with the senses)" (Carnahan 1). According to the Vedantic philosophy, the ultimate truth is that there is only one absolute reality, and the goal of human life is to realise this truth through self-knowledge (*atma-jnana*). The method of "neti, neti" meaning "not this, not this" is a crucial aspect of Advaita Vedanta's approach to the search for truth. This involves rejecting all concepts and perceptions of reality that are not identical to the self, thus leading to a realisation of the true nature of the self. The pursuit of knowledge (*jnāna*) is considered the most accurate path to self-realisation and liberation from the cycles of birth and death (*samsāra*) in Advaita Vedanta. This knowledge involves understanding the true nature of the self as identical to Brahman and the realisation that the world is illusory. The quest for truth in Advaita Vedanta is not merely an intellectual pursuit involving the mind and intellect, but a spiritual journey of self-discovery and transformation. The final aim of this journey is to attain knowledge of oneself and therefore a state of consciousness that is in harmony with the ultimate reality of Brahman.

This perspective became a source of inspiration for the German-Swiss writer Hermann Hesse who was quite influenced by Eastern philosophy. Hermann Karl Hesse, a renowned poet, novelist, and painter, although considered German-Swiss, studied Greek mythology, and the works of thinkers like Goethe, Schiller, Lessing and Nietzsche. After marrying Maria Bernoulli, Hesse settled in Gaienhofen on Lake Constance, where his interest in Buddhism was rekindled. Schopenhauer's ideas later led him to Theosophy and an interest in Indian thought, which inspired his masterpiece, *Siddhartha*. Hesse's trip to Sri Lanka and Indonesia had a significant impact on his literary work and produced novels such as *Journey to the East* and *Siddhartha*. Hesse's novels, including *Steppenwolf*, *Demian*, and *Francis of Assisi*, focus on self-realisation, spirituality, and the search for authenticity and truth in life. Hesse's work gained popularity during the 1960s counterculture and the hippie movement, as his novels resonated with those seeking enlightenment. Despite being recognised with many notable awards, including the Nobel Prize in Literature, Hesse's

works are not meant for entertainment but rather to provoke thought and appeal to serious-minded readers. Along with novels, Hesse wrote short stories, essays, and poems, and created a few paintings. Hesse passed away in 1962 in Switzerland after a life devoted to literature. In his celebrated novel *Siddhartha*, Hesse explores the journey of a young man in the search for enlightenment and the meaning of existence. The protagonist, Siddhartha, abandons a life of privilege to embark on a quest for truth and spiritual fulfilment, leading him to engage in a journey of self-discovery. Hesse's novel is widely regarded as a literary masterpiece and has become a popular text for readers seeking a deeper understanding of the human experience. He admits in the novel: "I had no less a task than to carry through to the end my scrutiny of chaos, with the now soaring, sinking hope of rediscovery beyond chaos nature and innocence" (Hesse 53).

Hesse's works frequently deliberate on the theme of self-discovery. Most of his writings, including *Journey to the East* and *Steppenwolf*, focus on finding the purpose of life. Many scholars who have studied Hesse's works to understand the theme of enlightenment argue the same in their papers. Carnahan notes: "In Hesse's work, there is always a sense of progress, of a generally painful but, nonetheless, tireless pushing forward towards new growth, new insights. This progress is always toward the interior of being, toward the inner self." The concept of an eternal truth of life is nothing new and has been explored by numerous philosophical and spiritual traditions throughout history. Different traditions have provided their own interpretations of the eternal truths of life, such as the Four Noble Truths in Buddhism and the concept of *Dharma* in Hinduism. However, the search for these eternal truths is seen as a way to understand the nature of existence and seek meaning and purpose in life. The Vedantic theory highlights the eternal truth of life as something that is independent of time, space, and causality. This absolute truth is considered to be real, conscious, and infinite. Although the search for eternal truth may be subjective and controversial, the exploration of these ideas can provide individuals with a sense of purpose and direction in life.

Eckhart Tolle, a well-known spiritual teacher and author, emphasises the importance of experiencing presence in the quest for truth. He encourages people to question their thoughts and beliefs and to become aware of the stories they tell themselves about the world and their place in it. By doing so, Tolle believes people can detach from their beliefs and conditioning of the mind and see them for what they are. Jiddu Krishnamurti was another spiritual teacher who laid emphasis on deconstructing the mind. Another renowned Indian master of self-realisation, Nisargadatta Maharaj believed that the key to enlightenment is to turn one's attention inward and investigate the nature of one's own being. He taught that the true nature of the self is 'pure consciousness' or 'awareness', two terms that he uses interchangeably, which are beyond the limitations of the body, mind, and ego. In his teachings, he emphasised the importance of direct experience over intellectual understanding and encouraged his followers to practice self-inquiry. Sri Ramana Maharshi, another revered Indian sage, taught that the goal of human existence is self-realisation, and it was not necessary to renounce the world physically in order to know oneself.

### *Siddhartha*

"Some of us think holding on makes us strong, but sometimes it is letting go" quotes Herman Hesse; one of the prominent novelists known for his books that questioned the eternal truth of life and explored the Eastern philosophies to attain understanding of it. His very famous novel *Siddhartha* showcases this quest to find the eternal truth of life. This novel uses the framework of the Vedantic philosophy along with finding answers to difficult questions about life like what the purpose of life is, what death is, and what the truth of life is. In her review for *The New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani praises Hesse's exploration of the quest for enlightenment and the idea that "true wisdom cannot be taught, only experienced." She notes that Siddhartha's journey reflects the broader human desire to find meaning in life and achieve a sense of inner peace.

*Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse is a timeless masterpiece that offers a profound exploration of the human condition and the search for spiritual enlightenment. Through the protagonist, Siddhartha, Hesse presents a captivating narrative that delves into the complexities of the human psyche and the quest for meaning in life. The novel is enriched with vivid descriptions and rich symbolism. Hesse's portrayal of Siddhartha's journey towards enlightenment is both enlightening and inspiring, and readers are left with a sense of awe and wonder long after the final page. This is a must-read for anyone seeking to explore the deeper aspects of life and spirituality.

In his novel, Herman Hesse uses his main character Siddhartha to discuss all the complex questions, thoughts, and ideas he has about life and death. Though this work comes under the category of philosophical fiction but as Hesse



himself believed his works are biography of his own life even this work reflects majorly upon Hesse's relation with life philosophy. In a way, this novel, like all the other novels, provides words to Hesse's thoughts.

Writing for *The Guardian*, Michael Wood describes *Siddhartha* as "a novel about the search for spiritual enlightenment that manages to be both deeply personal and universally relevant." He notes that Hesse's portrayal of Siddhartha's journey is both "evocative and precise," capturing the complexity of the human experience and the challenges of finding true inner peace. Wood also praises Hesse's exploration of the intersection of Eastern and Western philosophy, and notes that the novel's themes continue to resonate with readers today.

The protagonist Siddhartha is a young Brahmin who feels detached from common worldly pleasures like relationships, food, and wealth. He seeks a higher meaning in life and hence decides to set a goal to move ahead of all his fears and experience differences in the world. Hesse writes about the spiritual discontent felt by Siddhartha in the following way:

He found no delight in himself. walking the rosy paths of the fig tree garden, sitting in the bluish shade of the grove of contemplation, washing his limbs daily in the bath of repentance, sacrificing in the dim shade of the mango forest, his gestures of perfect decency, everyone's love and joy, he still lacked all joy in his heart. Dreams and restless thoughts came into his mind, flowing from the water of the river, sparkling from the stars of the night, melting from the beams of the sun, dreams came to him and a restlessness of the soul, fuming from the sacrifices, breathing forth from the verses of the Rig-Veda, being infused into him, drop by drop, from the teachings of the old Brahmins. Siddhartha had started to nurse discontent in himself, he had started to feel that the love of his father and the love of his mother, and the love of his friend, Govindan, would not bring him joy forever and ever, would not nurse him, feed him, satisfy him. He had started to suspect that his venerable father and his other teachers, that the wise Brahmins had already revealed to him the most and best of their wisdom, that they had already filled his expecting vessel with their richness, and the vessel was not full, the spirit was not content, the soul was not calm, the heart was not satisfied (3-4).

This certainly reflects the spiritual discontent felt by Siddhartha, as he begins to question the validity of his traditional upbringing and the pursuit of spiritual knowledge through ritual and sacrifice. It evokes a sense of restlessness and disillusionment as Siddhartha realises that the teachings of his elders are not enough to satisfy his longing for a deeper understanding of the nature of existence.

Hesse's use of imagery, such as the river and the stars, highlights the significance of the spiritual essence that Siddhartha is searching for, while his reference to the Rig-Veda and the teachings of the Brahmins emphasises the traditional methods of spiritual attainment that Siddhartha is beginning to question. It also emphasises the internal conflict that Siddhartha experiences as he struggles to reconcile his desire for spiritual enlightenment with his innate human desires and emotions. Despite the love and support of his family and friends, Siddhartha feels a sense of emptiness and lack of fulfilment that drives him to seek out new ways of understanding the world.

The first few lines of the novel illustrate the essence of Siddhartha's journey towards self-discovery and spiritual enlightenment, and it highlights the universal human quest for meaning and purpose in life. This very beginning written by the author clearly signifies how the character of Siddhartha felt spiritually incomplete and hollow and lived feeling hollowness and that the complete concept of this novel revolves around the search for eternal truth and purpose in life.

Siddhartha's journey takes him from a life of extravagance to one of modesty where he gives up all his comforts and understands the purpose for which a human being is born. He eventually gives up on all his comforts and soon becomes unrecognisable due to starvation and sunburn, but he now starts feeling more fulfilled than before. His journey of experiencing diverges in life brought him closer to himself and he could learn more about himself than he ever has.

On his way, he meets Govinda his childhood friend who is also in search of self. Both acknowledge that desire causes suffering as it develops attachment in humans to desires for objects they don't possess. On their journey, Siddhartha comes to the realisation that the material world and the spiritual world are co-related. Siddhartha begins as a young man who is not satisfied with his materialistic life and hence, he adopts a life of an ascetic only to later understand that his journey would remain incomplete without the material world. He then lives a materialistic life where he has a well-paid job and is married to a woman, where he has good food and wealth, but he now lacks spirituality; this



brings him to the conclusion that there needs to be a balance between both, and he finds that equilibrium in the fisherman's words who tells him about the river. The river here is symbolic of an interconnected and balanced life. Initially, Siddhartha had only seen the material world and had the longing to enter the spiritual world till he left it all behind and set out on a journey to find enlightenment, but soon he realises that even the spiritual world lacks completeness without the material world. Thus, the story of Siddhartha's journey towards enlightenment is also the story that depicts the relationship between the spiritual world and the material world and how both are equally significant in the realisation of the self.

The fisherman in the novel plays a vital role as it somewhere acted as the source of enlightenment for Siddhartha. He clearly was the representation of the balance one must have in their life. He lives separated from worldly desires and free from expectations while he enters the materialistic world whenever required henceforth, maintaining the balance between the spiritual and the material world. This very part of the novel gives a very beautiful lesson of life: only when one leaves the expectations and desires and learns what fulfils their soul in both ways, will they know their purpose in life. The symbol of the river is significant in this novel, depicting the union with the absolute. Hesse writes:

When Siddhartha listened attentively to this river, to this song of a thousand voices; when he did not listen to the sorrow or laughter, when he did not bind his soul to any one particular voice and absorb it in his Self, but heard them all, the whole, the unity, then the great song of a thousand voices consisted of one word: Om—perfection. (136)

The symbol of the river represents the journey towards spiritual enlightenment and the ultimate union with the divine. This passage describes how Siddhartha listens attentively to the river, not as individual voices, but as a collective whole, representing the interconnectedness of all things on earth. By detaching himself from the sorrow or laughter of individual voices and instead hearing them all as a unified whole, Siddhartha achieves a greater understanding of how the universe functions. The river becomes a metaphor for the underlying unity of all things, and the sound of its many voices culminates in the sacred syllable "Om" which represents the ultimate reality and perfection of the universe. These lines show the way of transcending the ego and individual desires in order to achieve a higher state of consciousness and a deeper understanding of the universe. Through his connection to the river, Siddhartha is able to achieve a sense of unity and oneness with the divine, which ultimately leads him to a state of enlightenment.

The river is a powerful motif in *Siddhartha*, representing the journey towards spiritual awakening and the ultimate union with the absolute. This passage emphasises the importance of hearing the interconnectedness of all things and transcending the limitations of the individual self to achieve a deeper understanding of the universe. The river helps him understand the spontaneity of life; for the river, there's no concept of time that exists: The river just is, for the river, there is no past, no future, no beginning, no end; for the river is only the present. This goes the same for men too. Hesse writes,

From that hour Siddhartha ceased to fight against this destiny. There shone in his face the serenity of knowledge, of one who is no longer confronted with conflicts of desires, who has found salvation, who is in harmony with the stream of events, with the stream of life, full of sympathy and compassion, surrendering himself to the stream, belonging to the unity of all things. (136)

Siddhartha finally surrenders to his destiny and achieves a state of inner peace and harmony. After years of searching for enlightenment through various paths and experiences, Siddhartha comes to the realisation that his destiny is to simply be a part of the greater stream of life and to accept it with compassion and understanding.

Siddhartha's inner conflict and struggle with desire is a central theme in the novel, and his decision to stop fighting against his destiny represents a significant turning point in his spiritual journey. By accepting his place in the world and surrendering himself to the flow of life, Siddhartha can become aware of his oneness with everything and find salvation.

This passage highlights the importance of letting go of personal desires and attachments in order to achieve a deeper sense of understanding and inner peace. It also emphasises the interconnectedness of all things and the idea that everyone is part of a greater whole. Siddhartha's serenity and sense of belonging to the unity of all things is a testament to the transformative power of spiritual growth and individuals' ability to achieve enlightenment.

This also represents a significant moment in Siddhartha's spiritual journey and encapsulates the central themes of the novel, including the struggle with desire, the importance of acceptance and surrender, and the interconnectedness of all things in this world and beyond. Here Siddhartha realises the oneness of the universe and understands that all creations of nature are indivisible. The novel ends with Govindan attaining moksha reflecting on his life and cherishing all the good and loving memories he had.

The title of the novel was selected carefully by the author. The title "Siddhartha" apart from being the protagonist's name also points to the main purpose of the novel. The term "Siddhartha" is derived from the Sanskrit words where 'Siddha' refers to the one who has attained a goal or has achieved enlightenment while 'artha' stands for meaning or purpose. Since the novel justifies the protagonist's spiritual journey and his quest for enlightenment, the title preferably suggests the same. If we talk about its philosophical aspect in Buddhism and Hinduism, Siddhartha was the name given to Gautam Buddha as he attained enlightenment.

A few more metaphors have been used in the form of the names of the characters in the novel. The character of Kamaswami helps Siddhartha in the business venture, his name reflects his materialistic as well as sensual nature. "Kama" in Sanskrit stands for desire, while "Swami" stands for lord suggesting he is the master of desire and pleasure. A character named "Kamala" meaning lotus is a courtesan who acts as Siddhartha's lover and spiritual guide. The lotus flower is a mystical symbol of spiritual enlightenment in Indian and Buddhist cultures and Siddhartha's lover named Kamala metaphorically implies her potential to lead him to enlightenment.

Salman Rushdie while talking about *Siddhartha* describes the novel as "a hymn to the quest for meaning and the human need for self-discovery." Rushdie praises Hesse's portrayal of Siddhartha's journey as a universal search for truth and notes that the novel "remains a potent reminder of the importance of individualism and the power of the human spirit to overcome adversity." which indeed stands so true about the novel "Siddhartha" considering its plot that revolves around seeking enlightenment and its major themes that depict the quest for truth.

### ***Journey to the East***

Journey to the East was published in the year 1932 by Herman Hesse. It is a novella that is written as a preliminary study of his work *The Glass Bead Game* for which he won the Nobel Prize in Literature. It is a story of inner pilgrimage as understood by many readers. The novel can be understood as an allegory of human desires for achieving enlightenment and the path that one needs to travel in order to achieve the ultimate truth of life. Hesse writes:

I realised that I had joined a pilgrimage to the East, seemingly a definite and single pilgrimage—but, in its broadest sense, this expedition to the East was not only mine and now; this procession of believers and disciples had always and incessantly been moving towards the East, towards the Home of Light. Throughout the centuries it had been on its way, towards light and wonder, and each member, each group, indeed our whole host and its great pilgrimage, was only a wave in the eternal stream of human beings, of the eternal strivings of the human spirit towards the East, towards Home (6).

defining the beginning of their spiritual journey. The story begins when after the great war a philosophical sect called the League comprising writers, musicians and artists pursues the search of the ultimate truth. It explores the nature of spiritual enlightenment and the search for meaning in life. The story is narrated by a former member of a secretive organisation called the League who sets out to narrate his experiences as a member of the group. The League is a group of seekers embarking on a journey to the East in search of a mythical land known as the "Home of the Light." The narrator joins the League and becomes part of a community of people who share a common goal of finding enlightenment and transcending the physical world's limitations. As the narrator travels with the League, he encounters numerous hurdles that force him to challenge his beliefs as well as limitations. Along the way, he meets a diverse group of characters who each embody different aspects of the spiritual journey. However, the journey takes a turn when the League is suddenly split, and the narrator is forced to continue his journey alone. He begins to realise that the journey to the East is not just a physical journey, but a journey of self-discovery and inner transformation. "Indeed our whole host and its great pilgrimage, was only a wave in the eternal stream of human beings, of the eternal strivings of the human spirit towards the east, towards home" (13), writes Hesse in *Journey to the East* reading the whole journey to be spiritual rather than physical. In the end, the narrator comes to understand that the search for enlightenment is a lifelong quest and that the true Home of the Light is not a physical location, but a state of mind and being that can be accessed at any time. The novella concludes with the narrator returning to the present day, still searching for meaning and



enlightenment, but now with a renewed sense of hope and direction. In his article titled “Herman Hesse: Pilgrim of Crisis,” Ralph Freedman aptly describes the novella as “a profound exploration of the quest for truth, and his portrayal of the central character's search for meaning is a testament to the human spirit's enduring quest for enlightenment.”

Besides *Siddhartha* and *Journey to the East*, there are several other works by Hesse that follow the same theme of self-exploration, enlightenment and seeking to find the eternal truth of one's life. Hesse's writings were highly influenced by the writings of Francis of Assisi, Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky due to which a recurring theme in his works is the individual's search for the self and the truth of existence. The search for truth is a personal and internal journey. It requires introspection, reflecting on one's inner self, and the courage to confront the multifarious questions of life and existence. Hesse's characters often encounter difficulties when seeking truth, grappling with existential fears, and struggling with the dilemma between individual freedom and societal expectations. In *Siddhartha*, the protagonist confronts his own thoughts and ultimately concludes that the universal truth of life is finding a balance between the inner self and society. Hesse's works strongly suggest the need for self-exploration, spiritual enlightenment, and self-discovery in one's life. Hesse's works propose that the quest for truth is a lifelong journey that requires a consistent commitment to self-exploration. To seek within oneself, one must be determined towards self-discovery, possess the willingness to challenge assumptions and beliefs, and introspect without bias, comprehending the oneness of the universe. Hesse encourages readers to embrace the complexity in their lives, seek the truth and purpose of their lives on their terms, and embark on their journey towards self-discovery.

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